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The Leading Lady

(Continued From Page Three)

"That's right," Bassett nodded in agreement. "She'd never have made a date with him. She snubbed him like the plague. If you knew her you wouldn't see anything in that going out. She was restless and unhappy and the place here—the sea, the views—fascinated her. It was our last evening and it was like her not to want to miss any of it, slip out for a minute to enjoy the end of it."

CHAPTER VII Of all the people gathered in the house that evening Anne had been the most silent. Her ravaged face, the contours broken by great hollows, bearing the stamp of shock and horror, had been unnoticed among the other faces. Now and then a pitying glance had been directed to her, grief as Sybil's friend must have added a last unbearable poignancy to the tragedy.

After her question to Flora her mind had seemed to blur and cease to function. She had run from the house not knowing what she did, gone hither and thither with the others, looking, speaking, listening in a blind daze. It was not till they returned to the living room that her faculties began to clear.



And the Boat—the Boat With Only Gabriel in It.

strange and sinister. And the boat—the boat with only Gabriel in it—kept coming up like a picture revolving on a wheel—going and returning, going and returning. Had she stayed, and what for? That question revolved with the picture of the boat.

She thought of telling Bassett and gave that up—with the police expected she could not get him alone, and why add to his burden with her suspicions? Yes, that was what it was—nothing but a suspicion. She had no certainty; Joe

might have been on the boat. Joe might have got off the island some other way. Tomorrow something might come to light that would make these hideous fancies seem like the dreams of delirium. That was the state of mind she tried to maintain when she went upstairs and overheard a man was on guard at the causeway.

With that knowledge her outlook changed. Her passive role was over. If Joe had done it and if he was on the island he would try to get off at low tide. It was safe to assume that he was outside, hidden all the causeway was open. To go out to find him would be useless, he would never reveal himself to her, and if she was seen suspicion would instantly be aroused. She must get somewhere that would command the causeway and its approaches. The best place—the only place—was the living room entrance. From there she could see in all directions, the balcony end, the kitchen wing, the pine grove. She would try to wave him back, possibly get to him—she had to take her chances and trust to Heaven.

The tide was at full ebb at midnight. At a quarter before she made ready. She took from the bureau a book she had been reading—if she met anyone she could say she had come down to find it—and opened her door with the stealth of a burglar. A dead silence reigned as she stole down the stairs and into the living room. At the entrance, pressed against the door, she looked out. It was a world of white enchantment, breathlessly still. She could see the patterned surface of leaves, the cracks and fissures of the rocks. Below, the channel lay almost bare, pools glistening like dropped mirrors, mounts of mud casting inky shadows.

She could hear the murmur of the men's voices from the open library windows, and like the throbbing of a muffled engine, the beating of her own heart. Into that deep enveloping quietude came a sound, so faint, so infinitely small and hushed, that only expectant ears could have caught it. It came from the room behind her, and turning, she slid back against the wall, her body black against its blackness. The sound continued, the opening of a door opposite, the door into the kitchen wing. It seemed no door in the world had ever opened so slowly—creaking, stopping, resuming, dying away. She could see nothing, for the darkness of the gallery lay impenetrable over that furtive entrance.

There was a footstep, light as the fall of a leaf, and she saw him coming toward her in that luminous pallor from the windows. He was like a shadow, so evenly dark, a shape without detail, moving with a shadow's noiseless passage. She saw the outline of the cap on his head and that he carried his shoes in one hand. She came forward with a hand raised for caution, sending her whisper: "Go back, Joe. The causeway's watched. You can't get over that way. Go!"

He was gone, a fleet flying, vanishing back into the darkness under the gallery. Out of it came the soft closing of a door. The room swayed, pale light and shadows swayed and coalesced. She knew she was near a table and put out her hand to steady herself for it, something solid to hold to for

one minute. The polished surface slid under her fingers, and she dropped out with the hand that held the book. The book slipped from her grasp, fell with a thud like a thunderclap, and a grasping snatch to save it swept a lamp crashing to the floor. Panic dispelled her faintness and she made a rush for the door. She had gained it! Her fingers clutched round the knob, as she heard the steps of the men in the hall and knew it was too late to escape.

"It's nothing," she called, hearing her voice thin and hoarse. "Nothing happened. It's only Anne Tracy."

"The lights leaped out and she saw them, Bassett with his hand on the electric button, stricken still, looking this way and that. His eyes found her first, backed against the door, a small green-clad figure with an ashen face.

"What's this mean?" said Rawson. "Nothing." She was afraid the handle would rattle with the shaking of her hand, so let it go. "I upset the lamp in the dark. I didn't see it, that's all."

"What were you doing here?" "I came down to get my book. I forgot and left it when I went upstairs."

"You're as white as a sheet," Williams blurted out. "Do you suppose I frighten you?" demanded Bassett.

"No, but a sort of faintness came over me there by the table, and I grabbed at it and upset the lamp."

Rawson looked at the table with the shattered fragments of the lamp beside it. It was not far from the entrance door. "Did you see anything—anything outside?" "No, not a thing, and I didn't hear a sound."

"What do you suppose made you feel faint?" "Oh!" She dared to make a gesture, upraised hands that dropped limply. "Bassett thought enough here to make anybody faint?"

"You've got to remember, Rawson," said Bassett, who thought the man's insistence unnecessary, "what a shock this has been—especially to Miss Tracy, who was Miss Saunders' friend."

"Remember," then to Anne: "Miss Tracy, if you should withhold any information from us you'd get yourself into a very uncomfortable position."

"I wouldn't, I wouldn't," she breathed. Rawson's glance remained on her, dubious intent. Bassett noted it with a resentment he found it difficult to hide.

"You can absolutely rely on Miss Tracy," he said. "She would be perfectly frank with you if she had anything to tell."

"No doubt, no doubt," said the other, walking to the entrance. "I'm going out to have a look around." On the sill he turned and addressed Anne. "I gave some instructions to you ladies and I expect to have them followed. You'll please remember them in the future."

He passed out into the brilliancy of the moonlight. Now that he was gone Bassett felt he must make her understand. He had been astonished at what she had done. It was so unlike her, a disobedience of orders at such a time as this.

"You must do what they tell you, Anne. They have to make these rules, and it's up to us to keep them."

"I will now, you can trust me. Mr. Williams, you can see how it was. I couldn't sleep and my mind was full of this awful thing, and I thought if I could put it on something else—get free from my thoughts, even for a few moments!"

Williams granted his comprehension. He felt rather tenderly toward her, she looked so small and wan, and her voice was so pleading. "Where is your book?" he asked.

"On the table behind you. I was feeling round for it and I think I pushed it off with the lamp."

"What was the name of it?" "A story," by Joseph Conrad. He went to the table. His back turned, she and Bassett exchanged a long look. Williams picked up the book and came back with it.

"Here it is," he said, giving it to her. "And just make a note of the fact that you're not to go round the house at night after books or anything else."

She assured him she would not, she would give them no more trouble, and opening the door she slipped away. They remained without speaking till she came out on the gallery and walked to her room.

"Well," said Williams, "her book was there."

Bassett stared at him. "Was there? Why shouldn't it be? Good God! You have any idea she was lying? If you have, set it off of your head. I've known Miss Tracy for three years and she could no more say what wasn't true than—well, she couldn't, that's all."

"I don't think she did. It sounds to me like a perfectly straight story."

"If you can take my word for that."

They were back in the library when Rawson reappeared with Miss Tracy, unable to sleep, had been sitting up by his window when Rawson, acutely, had stopped to inquire if he had seen anyone. When he had seen anyone, when he had volunteered to join in the hunt, and the two had been about the house and the immediate vicinity. Nothing had been discovered, and Patrick had seen no sign of life or heard no sound.

They had come back for the electric torch, and were going to enter their search. A person crouched on the seaward side of the island might be moving at this hour when the causeway was free. Bassett said he would go with them to the boat house.

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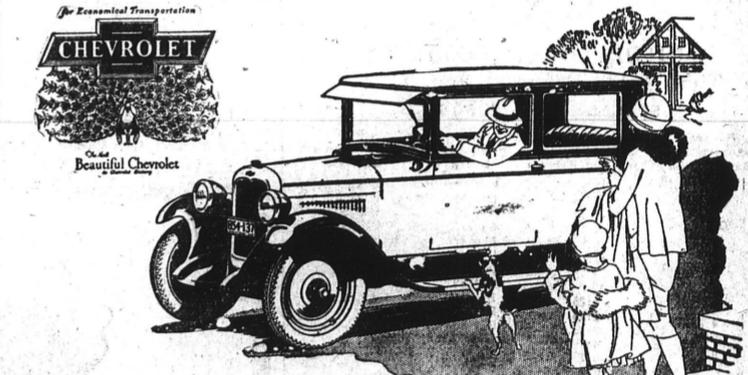
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